

StewardCAST

A monthly e-newsletter of LCMS Stewardship Ministry

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To Tithe or Not To Tithe?



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For generations, church stewardship programs have focused on the concept of the tithe. The tithe has been used at various times as a guide, as a target and, unfortunately, as a tool for manipulation and guilt.

Defenders of the tithe point to its roots in Scripture. Others feel that the word “tithe” has been horribly damaged by misuse over the years and talk about setting the word aside. So, which is it? Is “tithe” a helpful word in stewardship or is it a hindrance and a roadblock?

Let’s try the Lutheran answer: YES! It is both/and, not either/or.

Scriptural stewardship

YES! Lutherans can and perhaps should use the word that the Scripture uses. First, it is important to understand what a tithe is. It is much more than just a formulaic 10-percent gift that a faithful person reads off a giving chart. Such a simplistic approach can be problematic.

In reality, this topic is more complex. Dr. John Kleinig notes in his commentary on Leviticus that God instituted two kinds of offerings in Leviticus. In Leviticus 1–3, animal and grain offerings were established as part of the Divine Service. Then in Leviticus 27, a separate, second offering was instituted, for the maintenance of the sanctuary and support of the clergy.¹

There has always been a need to maintain both the sanctuary and those who serve in it. It was true at the base of Sinai and it is true in our local congregations.

Scribes and Pharisees?

Tithes are found in Scripture, yes. But those who would decry the use of the word “tithe” might well object to its use based on Jesus’ use, or lack thereof, in the Gospels. In fact, when Jesus did talk about tithes (Matthew 23 for example) it was really to decry their abuses by the Pharisees. There is a sense from the Gospels that some even used the dedication of wealth to the Lord as indicated in Leviticus 27 to protect their wealth rather than using it to care for their families.

¹ John W. Kleinig, *Concordia Commentary: Leviticus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 594.

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“Take the time to teach the congregation what the tithe really is.”

Tithes could be abused in modern congregations as well. The abuse might not be the protection of individual wealth, but rather institutional survival. Too often, congregations tie their stewardship teaching directly to the ongoing concerns of the local congregation. But ultimately, stewardship of earthly resources is intended to support the work of the Gospel. That work does have its greatest impact in the local setting. But the Church is much larger than the local congregation. For the needs of the local congregation to trump any participation in the extension of the Gospel ministry “to all the ends of the earth” (ACTS 1:8) is indeed a problem.

An even greater abuse is when tithing becomes transactional. When the offering is seen as just another bill that the family pays for regular religious services, the abuse of the tithe continues. When the only thought in the process is the steps of a giving chart, the steward is in dangerous territory. This abuse prevents stewardship from being the free and joyous activity of a child of God, and God’s family the Church, in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes. Should the word “tithe” be used in a way that supports these and other abuses? NO!

A confessional tithe

So, which is it? Should the word “tithe” be used or not? YES! And NO! If the word

“tithe” is to be used in congregations, it is critical that it be understood biblically and confessionally and not just economically.

Take the time to teach the congregation what the tithe really is. The steward leader cannot assume that those they lead will have this understanding on their own.

If the steward leader is going to use the word “tithe” as a weapon of guilt or as simply an economic formula, the answer is a resounding NO! Just stop! Repent!

However, steward leaders who put in the work to lay this groundwork will reap a harvest of stewards who are more than willing to tithe in the way that Dr. Kleinig asserts Jesus would encourage: “Jesus did not abolish votive offerings and tithes. In fact, He assumed that they would continue in the church as acts of mercy rather than legal obligations.”²

Teaching the tithe in this light is simply a call for Christians to be who the Lord created and redeemed them to be! One approach to the tithe leads to resentment. The other leads to Gospel freedom!

Steward leader, you are free to use the word “tithe” or not. If you do, use it in light of the Gospel. Speak not of obligation, but of response. And that response, in the light of what Jesus has done on the cross and in the empty tomb, is one driven by a Holy Spirit-inspired faith which leads to joy!

² Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 595.